DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 094 EA 018 998

AUTHOR Watts, O. B.
TITLE The Secondary School Principalship: The Task and the Constraints.
PUB DATE Jun 86
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, June 1-4, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role; Foreign Countries; *Government School Relationship; *Instructional Leadership; Politics of Education; *Principals; *School Administration; Secondary Education; Seniority; Transfer Policy
IDENTIFIERS *Canada; *Constraints

ABSTRACT

Inspired by Franz Kafka's predatory leopard anecdote, this speech explores the plight of Canadian secondary school principals trying to meet students' educational needs within the constraints imposed by politics and finance. A cross-country survey of 60 principals disclosed some typical problems. Principals must be reponsive to public opinion without forming treacherous alliances. Despite having democratic beliefs, most principals are mistrusted by teacher unions and required to stand aloof from grievance procedures. Principals are kept from bettering the school work force by a seniority system giving first preference to transferring teachers. Most principals cannot do their own hiring except for appointing department heads. Principals are themselves subject to transfer without consultation after a fixed number of years. In western provinces, principals are responsible for fiscal administration of their schools without help from the central office. Most have little leeway in designing curricula to meet local student needs. Despite these bothersome constraints, all the principals surveyed appear to feel positive. All have assessed the job, perceived the limitations, and work within them while pushing for change. Sound administrative skills are the key, along with acquiring a solid data base and skills to interpret it. (MLH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED277094

THE SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP:

THE TASK

AND

THE CONSTRAINTS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

O.B. Watts

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

O. B. WATTS

University of Western Ontairo
London, Ontario N6A 3K7 CANADA

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, June 1-4, 1986).

EA 018 998

In one of his stories Kafka tells of villagers in a far-off land dwelling near a jungle, who used to give thanks each year to the gods in a simple rite. Vessels of sacred water were set on an altar while the people knelt in prayer led by their priest. One year a leopard came into their midst, ignored the terror-struck villagers, drank the water from the vessels, and returned to the jungle. The following year the same thing happened. When it had been repeated for the third time the villagers made the leopard's action part of their religious rite.

The image is vivid. But how to interpret the symbol?

According to one possible gloss the leopard could represent the intrusion of government into education lapping up offerings and ignoring the scholars whose craven response is to show it honour. My theme is the plight of the secondary school principal who could, at one level of interpretation, be the hapless priest trying to mediate between educational concepts and the rapt teachers and students. What do I mean by this stretched flight of fancy?

In a cross-country survey of some sixty principals, I found that although this leopard, and it takes many forms, may be viewed as a threat to their authority, the principals regard it as benign as long as they keep their nerve and remember their purpose.

From the Yukon Territory to Newfoundland they show a remarkable unity of purpose which is to meet the educational needs of their students within the bounds imposed by the leopard of politics and finance. Politically the principal must be

acutely aware of currents of opinion and know when to float along with them, when to strive against them and by what means. For example, an alliance temptingly offered in one set of circumstances could prove treacherous in another set: a group of parents ready to put their weight behind, let's say, a principal's no-smoking policy may turn hostile when it comes to the selection of some texts of which they disapprove. The superintendent who calls for boldness in bringing about change may distance himself from the principal whose actions, prompted by such a call, turn out to be too bold.

In all except one province principals are legally members of the same federation or association as classroom teachers, giving them equal rights with their colleagues in theory; in practice, this may not be so. When it comes to a grievance, the principal may be looked upon as the arm of management which unionism historically deeply distrusts. But faced with the alternative of non-membership, as in Quebec and the United States, fewer than ten per cent of those surveyed would wish to be excluded from their federation.

Why? Perhaps because the principal is one of those in whom the principles of democracy are most deeply ingrained. Many times the temptation to impose their will because they "know best" must be suppressed and longer, painstaking ways must be found to deal with complex situations in the micro-society of which they are titular head.

Consider: When it comes to staffing, the principal of one school in a system of any size is limited for the most part, to

taking teachers whose jobs have disappeared in another school because there are no more students for them to teach. Why do they have no students? The declining birth-rate has something to do with it but sometimes their own professional shortcomings may be the reason. To make the principal's life harder the leopard's eldest cub - called seniority - waits in concealment for the principal who is minded to go out beating the bushes for likely replacements. Even those who have no seniority clause threatening them are, twenty-five per cent of them, not able to do their own hiring and are bound to take on their staff people whom, in some cases, they have not even seen simply because the candidates have been approved by central office.

For the appointment of heads of department the situation is better: more than seventy per cent are made by the principal. But for vice-principals the report is dismal: only three of those surveyed have their choice. Some dozen may make their views known but fruitlessly in terms of influencing the final decision.

Over eighty per cent of principals are subject to transfer with or without consultation after a fixed number of years. Many of them, it is true, like this policy but a few, faced with an entrenched staff who know as well as they do what the policy is, find as new arrivals, that their colleagues reluctant to accept change greet them with the spoken or implied message: "We can outlast you just as we did the others."

There are persons, apart from teachers, who are important to the school, and I have not even touched upon the students who are

its vital essence. These persons are secretaries, caretakers, and workers in grounds and building. What say do the principals have when they are hired? As far as secretaries are concerned only twenty percent have a say, caretakers five per cent, and very few principals could claim control over the maintenance of building and grounds. In whom is this control vested? Partly the central office and partly the union.

Let us go on to money matters.

In one city in the western provinces principals are charged with the fiscal administration of their schools. The principal of a school of some 1600 students would be given about $4,000,000 to cover all costs save some large, unexpected items. This principal would know what it means to be accountable in a literal sense; also in another sense, because all those in the school community would be canvassed for their opinions of his/her stewardship and attention would be paid to the results of such a survey. This is a dream to some principals and a nightmare to others.

"How can I can be a leader, inspire my teachers, guide my students if I am burdened with the need to count pennies? What should I ask for to keep the plant running? These, surely, are matters for the central office business administrator?" So cry some, perhaps shy of wielding such power, shaped as they have been to fit into a slot in an organization chart. Whether such a view is held by most is not clear. Let us look again at the task.

No matter who manages finances it is the principals who must

deal with curriculum. Are they masters of the courses taught in their school? Hardly: in provinces like Ontario, ministry guidelines are in place, in others province-wide examinations dominate curriculum. What scope is there for the forward-looking principal to include in course offerings those that will meet the needs of students in a particular community? Not a great deal. One principal of a private school of high prestige frets at the reins the ministry uses to restrain him from striking out along unfamiliar paths.

But are there not means whereby principals can act to change the pattern? There are committees, of course, and these are formed to encourage the participation of those lured by the prospect of fresh concepts. However, after a number of meetings, sometimes a sort of entropy results from the rubbing together of minds out of rhythm with one another: energy is misdirected and expended uselessly. The pattern may be changed but the boundaries remain.

Despite these bothersome constraints all the principals surveyed showed themselves to be healthy in mind and body. The reason for this is that they have assessed the job, decided on the limits and work within those limits, always with an eye to pushing them outward. Each has an understanding of the role which varies only slightly from one to another; if there is a difference it lies in the degree of skill which each brings to bear on accomplishing the task. All of them realize that the level of authority accorded them, regardless of the regulations of ministry or board, depends on the competence - or skills -

they demonstrate. The principal who has acquired a solid data base and is skillful in interpreting it, will move barriers restricting his or her authority with an air of assurance that brooks no opposition; at least, not the kind of opposition which is based on rule rather than substance. The successful principal sees clearly what is expected in terms of leadership, demands high standards from staff and students, and develops skills to reach this goal.

Much has been written about such skills: there is a wealth of research on the subject to which a wise principal will refer in quest of improvement.

These skills are all encompassed in three cardinal qualities: judgment, imagination, and energy, and the greatest of these is energy.

One of the questions posed in the survey was: "What is your chief source of frustration?" One principal answered, "When I feel frustrated it means that my energy level is down. I am unable to focus on and deal with a problem; therefore, I am myself the source of frustration. This is a weakness - which passes. When I reach the stage when it persists I shall know it is time for me to retire."

O.B. Watts

June, 1986